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ABSTRACT

The children of migrant farm workers have been systematically deprived educationally, due chiefly to disclaimers of responsibility made by local, state, and federal bureaucracies. One proposed method to increase educational achievement among migrant children is through increased parent involvement. Parent involvement in migrant education programs is almost nonexistent due to a variety of factors: (1) The migrant faces an enormous disparity between the school setting and the home setting, and between school language and home language; (2) Migrant families are politically and culturally isolated from the rest of society and are frequently regarded with disdain; (3) Most migrant adults themselves have little education, speak little or no English, and are afraid of teachers and administrators. Migrancy itself is the definitive cause behind the lack of special services for migrant children. Migrant farm workers must be informed about the law, about educational programs, about the importance of what their and their children's participation can mean. (JN)

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MEETING THE CHALLENGE--SERVING MIGRANT CHILDREN

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For the many advocacy agencies and individuals committed to the use of the public schools as the major means for educating children, problems with delivery of services usually lead to one critical question: "Who's in charge here?" The answer, at all levels of educational institutions, has often been, "Not us." To the horror of advocates, this response often appears to be accurate. Whatever the question, the local, state and federal bureaucracies frequently (with some grain of truth) disclaim final responsibility.

For a variety of reasons there is simply not a clear hierarchy of rank, authority, or responsibility among educational jurisdictions, but neither is there a genuine partnership of levels.

One group of children has been more systematically short-changed by this chain of noncommand than any other: the children of migrant farmworkers. The fact that they were the most educationally deprived children in the nation prompted Congress, in 1966, to amend Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Act to mandate programs and projects directed specifically at meeting the special educational needs of these children.

It is 1980 now, and educational achievement is still tragically low among migrant children. How can this be changed? One way, most parents and advocates are convinced, is through increased parent involvement. Extensive research has shown that children's educational achievements rise when their parents participate, apparently regardless of their parent's academic background or lifestyles. Meaningful parent involvement is a need that is recognized by children, by parents, by advocates, by educators and by Congress. Yet real parent involvement in migrant education programs is still almost nonexistent. Why?

The answer lies partly with migrancy itself: employment for migrant farm-workers is, by definition, seasonal and temporary in nature. A family with a home base in Texas may be in Michigan or Wisconsin for the last six weeks of school. Or a family based in Florida may be in New York or North Carolina for the first two months of the school year.

The migrant child frequently faces an enormous disparity between the school setting and the home setting, and between school language and home language. Twice a day the child must move from one culture to a significantly different one. This transition can be a difficult one: school values may not reflect home values, the orderly processes of the school may not resemble those of the home, ideals of appearance, dress, punctuality, self-control and language may not resemble the ideals presented in the home.

Migrant families are politically isolated, without moorings in a society that enfranchises its citizens through their place of residence, and in a society that often looks at migrancy with cultural disdain. Most migrants are truly stateless and cannot receive or exercise the political rights that other Americans take for granted.

Additionally, most migrant adults have had only four to six years of total schooling and many do not speak English. They are likely to be unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the school and with school administrators and teachers, their own school experiences having been hostile and unrewarding. Many believe that they will be treated with contempt by the school, that they will not be able to communicate with school personnel, or that any questions they ask or demands they make will result in reprisals against their children.

But these factors do not constitute excuses for not involving parents; rather, they should be an incentive for officials to redouble efforts to facilitate parental involvement. It is, in fact, a serious challenge to government officials at all levels.

Unfortunately, the challenge is not now being met. And at the base hierarchical level, migrant children still often face outright discrimination within the school. A recent case of a teacher spraying a migrant child with perfume because "they all smell so bad," is not an unusual episode. And the principal who recently appointed student "monitors" to report -- for punishment -- children who speak Spanish among themselves is, sadly, not alone among administrators.

The school receiving Migrant Education funds may segregate migrant children in the most dilapidated and inhospitable facilities for the primary curricular purpose of denigrating the children's looks, language, families and culture, while papering migrant classroom walls with magazine illustrations of blonde, smartly-suited, briefcase-carrying models.

Community misconceptions abound, and are reflected in the lack of welcome extended to migrants working in the area. Service providers are pleased to ignore the needs of their migrant constituency or impose insurmountable obstacles, if necessary, to discourage those seeking help.

Despite all the listed impediments to migrant parent participation, such participation is a reality in some areas. Where parents are active, there has been a positive partnership of people who place first priority on serving children well. It can be done, and done well, yet many schools simply refuse. Seeking enforcement where there is no accountability is the frustrating task of parents and advocates.

The buzz words "local autonomy" protect the State departments of education from having to enforce the mandate for meaningful parent involvement. The explanation is often that enforcing such onerous provisions will "discourage" the school from running any project for migrant students -- and then where will "they" be? Maintaining good relationships with the local education agencies remains the primary concern of State agencies.

The federal Office of Education has the same concern vis-a-vis the States. Education is a State responsibility and forcing an issue will discourage the States from conducting any programs for the children who need them so desperately. Maintaining good relationships with the States is the only way to get services delivered.

What expert observers frequently find, therefore, are a great many good relationships and not very much meaningful parent involvement. The federal response to parent and advocate demands for increased parent involvement has always been to explain that the mobility of the parents is a "complicating factor" in the effort to involve them. And parents and advocates are compelled to continue stressing that mobility is not a factor in migrancy, it is migrancy. It is the sole definitional cause of the need for special services: these children have been unable to get quality education because they have been mobile.

In defining the problems and issues of migrancy, it becomes clear that getting involved is not just a parent responsibility. Migrant farmworkers have not been injected with instant knowledge of Subpart 1, Part B, Title I of Public Law 95-561. They must be told about the law about the programs, what their children's participation can mean, what their own participation can mean to their children, and some logistical details of how to participate.

Presenting this information is a primary local responsibility, and presenting it well will bring parents into the local project. Modest support efforts on the part of the school, presented with openness and respect, will keep parents there. The school responsibilities being filled, it then becomes a parent responsibility to stay involved.

The federal law and regulations now require that every agency operating a Title I-Migrant Education program or project consult with a Parent Advisory Council formed for that purpose, or risk loss of funds. Parents and advocates fought hard for this provision, and will continue to fight for its enforcement.

The chain of noncommand, however, will make this a phantom struggle unless the federal Department of Education takes the responsibility which is ultimately theirs of holding LEAS and SEAS accountable in the parent involvement area. Active parents and advocates refuse to accept the oft-posed notion that federal offices are neither responsible nor accountable for widespread illegalities in a program they administer.

And such a debate should not be necessary; it is a bureaucracy-born issue, not a real question of rights and entitlements. The right is clearly stated in the law, but bureaucracies are disclaiming responsibility for the law. And this struggle will drain more precious energy from parents who are already exhausted by lives of deprivation. Most tragically, this unnecessary struggle delays and denies rightful opportunities to hundreds of thousands of migrant children, creating yet another generation of adults without options.